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Commencement Address

By

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I'm sure it is clear to the user that certain parts of my job stood out in my own mind as gems during my two-terms as Surgeon General. The Public Health Service itself, the Commissioned Corps of that Service, the World Health Organization, the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, the Associations of Military Surgeons of the United States, the National Library of Medicine, and the several agencies, which are part of the Public Health Service and make it what it is.

This was the second time that this medical school had asked me to give its commencement address and I was to do it yet a third time several years later.

All the time I was Surgeon General and most of the time since, just as there was always an undercurrent in some government agency – in my time, it was the Office of Management and Budget – that was trying to get rid of the Commissioned Corps, so it was with the Uniformed Services University. There was always someone in Congress who thought we should eliminate it. Like the WHO or the Commissioned Corps, if one were to get rid of USUHS, it would have to be re-established very shortly thereafter, as soon as the gainsayers recognized the terrific mistake they had made. The Uniformed Services need an elite medical corps to carry out its medical and health missions for future generations. An increasing number of graduates of West Point, Annapolis, and the Air Force Academy are being accepted at the F. Edward Hebert School of Medicine of the USUHS and there have even been a few public health officers as well. I think September 11th and the war on Iraq, may have stabilized the criticism for a while, at least that is my hope.

This address was sentimental, because I felt that way. I only had six weeks before I would go on leave and become inactive and then on October 1st, I would say farewell to one of the most exciting periods of my life. What I wanted to talk to the graduating class about was just a little reminiscing. I went through my own appointment by President Reagan, the ordeal I went through awaiting confirmation, in spite of that I didn't believe that I should deposit my religious beliefs in a blind trust and leave them there for the duration, nor should I donate my moral values to a worthy charity, and I shouldn't pack my ethical principles in an old attic trunk and forget about them until my term was over.

I believed then, and continue to believe now, that the best approach to public service is to promise to give it everything you have of whatever it is that you do have. I decided not to change C. Everett Koop, but to be the best C. Everett Koop I could be and that was first message to the graduating class.

I then went through a litany of some of the major issues that had sandpapered me and contributed to my being the best I could be: the Baby Doe situation, the series of the Surgeon General's Workshops that focused on the needs of the handicapped child and his or her family, my exclusion from the AIDS effort on the part of the government followed by my becoming the chief spokesperson for the government on AIDS and my blunt messages on the subject of AIDS transmission and prevention.

I closed with a reminder to that particular audience that my predecessors had so conducted themselves as Surgeons General that this office was among the most credible and reliable in the government...the envy of some Presidents. Therefore, my whole relationship with the AIDS issue had a sense of tension attached to it, because I had to maintain the credibility of the office, as well as to see what was necessary in this very complex and emotional charged issue. My closing message was simple: "Know yourself...and be true to you...and everything else will follow." I thought that was a good model for every graduate, but I believe also, that it has special relevance for people like them and me, who had chosen to serve our country.